

Tweetre: What role can technology play in contemporary theatre?

di Dave Carolan
dcarolan@gmail.com

This article is a brief, individual review which illustrates some advances that digital technology can foster for theatre. Whether this can be seen as an encroachment or augmentation in this field, there are clear examples of significant opportunities for practitioners who follow the digital route as a means to increase theatrical participation. Concurrent to this, this article will demonstrate the validity of using the principles of game design to consider the potentials offered by digital theatre and indicate possible avenues for future research.

What is Tweetre? Tweetre is a neologism: a pun of Twitter and theatre. As a concept, it is a way of considering how theatre can be enhanced by digital technology.

Technology has played a vital role in enhancing the sensation of theatre, whether it be the use of props or masks in Ancient Greece, or the use of wagons in Medieval theatre. Traditional theatre has been limited to analogue effects and what the text can outline; and with regards to a dramatic text, a linguistic horizon may be appreciated. Stephen Ullmann's research (1967) proposes a hierarchy of senses, in which the 'lower' senses such as touch and taste have the poorest vocabulary, and that this is reflected in textual works¹.

Indeed, theatre can be understood as a game of sensations, whether it be the presentation of horrific behaviour that raises the hair on the back of your neck, or a set designed and lit so beautifully it makes your eyes water. In a theatre we can be moved by an explosion, literal or figurative, or disgusted by the stink of smoke reeking from some unsavoury character. We can even be tantalised by a taste of chocolate we can only imagine. Such are the gifts of art and more specifically of theatre. Can digital technology

¹ S. Ullmann, *The principles of Semantics*, B. Blackwell, Oxford 1967.

enhance or augment our experience of theatre to the benefit of practitioner and audience alike?

What does digital theatre feel like? A simple example of digital theatre can be appreciated in the live screening of theatrical performances to remote locations. The benefits of such are manifold, not least presenting the opportunity for productions to reach audiences beyond traditional cultural hubs. One can watch a live premier London production of *Hamlet* in a cinema setting in a regional town hundreds of kilometres away, such as Cork in southwest Ireland.

However, such live screening events are not without limitations. While such an experience can possess the ‘danger’ that only live performance brings, the regional audience member is subject to filmic considerations, such as live editing, where the eye is guided to focus on particular aspects by a skilled technician. Furthermore, there is the difficulty of unintended alienation since the actors, performing live, feed off the audience reacting before them in London, not in Cork. In such a case, a certain disparity of sensation arises, and such an experience feeds into what one considers as the traditional barrier or screen that theatre as we experience it seeks to break through².

Notwithstanding such considerations; beyond the limits of Ullmann’s linguistic horizon and the alienation of remote viewing; there are other conceptions of digital theatre that can foster sensation and can enhance the theatrical experience. Indeed, such conceptions may be already in play, whether practitioners recognise it or not. For instance, it is contended by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that communication technology necessarily affects cognitive organisation and in turn, social organisation:

If a new technology extends one or more of our senses outside us into the social world, then new ratios among all our senses will occur in that particular culture. It is comparable to what happens when a new note is added to a melody. And when the sense ratios alter in any culture then what had

² I am grateful to my friend Diarmaid Shortall for this insight.

appeared lucid before may suddenly become opaque, and what had been vague or opaque will become translucent³.

If technology changes culture in such a way, then theatre and its place in culture is changing with it. However, by accepting this new note of technology into the melody of theatre, one may surmise that the 'sense ratios' could perhaps develop our understanding of theatre's potential. What this understanding can be is all dependent on how willing we are to play.

This article is a brief, individual review which will illustrate some advances that digital technology can foster for theatre. Whether this can be seen as an encroachment or augmentation in this field, there are clear examples of significant opportunities for practitioners who follow the digital route, as a means to increase theatrical participation. Concurrent to this, this article will demonstrate the validity of using the principles of game design to consider the potentials offered by digital theatre, and indicate possible avenues for future research.

So why should we consider digital theatre? A survey which considered participation in cultural activities appraises an apparent decline of 4 points from 2007 (32% of respondents had been to theatre at least once in the past twelve months) to 2013 (28%)⁴. Measures can be explored and tested to address this decline. The three year project SENSES: the Sensory Theatre; one component of which, a conference in Paris in June 2016, which this review was created for; provides transnational strategies for addressing the issue of theatre audience building.

The advent of information technology may appear to be an antagonist in Theatre's struggle. Indeed, I.T. percolates our daily lives, providing innumerable distractions that forestall the opportunity to take part in theatre. Beyond opportunities inherent in I.T. that allow practitioners to promote their work, there is a tangible scepticism that digital interference can destroy what is inherent to the theatrical experience. However Philip

³ M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the making of typographic man*, Faber and Faber, London 1962, p. 42.

⁴ European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM "Research and Speechwriting" Unit), *CULTURAL ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION REPORT*, Published November 2013. Accessed 23rd October, 2016. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_399_en.pdf

Auslander, following on from Frederic Jameson, argues that the concept of “mediatisation”⁵ in postmodern culture means:

that the theatre can no longer be seen as occupying a fine-arts context that is culturally distinct from film, television and other media. The collapse of the distinction between fine arts and mass media has meant that the theatre now functions as a medium and has to compete for audiences with the other media⁶.

One way to broach the challenge of theatre audience building is to reconcile the intrinsic and sometimes opaque values of theatre with its instrumental values. A piece of theatre impacts on the audience member as an individual. It is an experience at once personal, yet social. The American playwright Thornton Wilder defined what, for him, makes theatre intrinsically unique. His essay, “Some Thoughts on Playwriting” (1941)⁷ laid out four qualities. To paraphrase those qualities:

1. Theatre is dependent on the work of many collaborators;
2. It is addressed to a group mind;
3. It is based upon pretence;
4. Its action takes place in a perpetual present time⁸.

Wilder concludes the final paragraph with a striking first sentence: “The theatre offers to imaginative narration its highest possibilities”⁹. If theatre appeals to the narrative imagination, we too can be imaginative with its narrative. If we are to consider the question of how to increase theatre participation, perhaps then we can consider those who don’t visit a theatre.

Theatre is primarily a visual and aural medium. This article will illustrate how technology can present theatre to a subset of the population not normally attracted to this medium: the kinaesthetic personality type; the person who learns by doing. Those who assimilate information primarily through kinaesthetic or tactile modes is estimated at 37% of the general

⁵ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1991, p. 162.

⁶ P. Auslander, “Postmodernism and Performance”, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 112.

⁷ T. Wilder, “Some thoughts on Playwriting”, *The Intent of the Artist*, ed. A. Centeno, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1941, p. 83.

⁸ Ivi, p. 156.

⁹ Ivi, p. 272.

population¹⁰. Sensory Theatre is a means to attract this subset. Consider then, how we play. Consider the magic circle.

What is the magic circle? A child understands the magic circle as the space to play. The magic circle is a term conceived by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga who took an aesthetic approach to cultural history. He understood the importance of art and spectacle and considered play to be the chief developmental force in human culture, most notably in his work, *Homo Ludens*, first published in 1938. Ironically, for the purposes of this article, he believed technological development to be diametrically opposed to that which was perceived to be the spontaneous and organic elements of culture. However, for our benefit, he codified the magic circle, with other human endeavours, as a unique context in time and space:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart¹¹.

The performance of this 'act apart' is how one conceptualises play. And with play comes rules. Or rather, elegant principles that we can apply to theatre. To enter a theatre is to enter the magic circle, where the senses become heightened. We play the theatre game already: we dress up, we visit, we expect entertainment. This clearly appeals to a certain percentage of the population. But to move beyond this core group, the notion of theatre and what it is to play, can therefore be thought of in a new way. It is important to note at this point, that this new way can be understood as a supplemental sense of theatre, rather than something that could threaten the traditional experience of theatre that we know and love. In effect, it means a new way of considering the concept of play.

¹⁰ M. Willis, V. Kindle Hodson, *Discover Your Child's Learning Style*, Prima Publishing, Roseville 1999, p. 5.

¹¹ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, tr. Leyden, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1949, p. 10.

Play is a shared quality both in the fields of theatre and digital technology. Digital technology can be conceived as a complimentary counterpart to one of our oldest art forms. To bracket this idea I will use a book which establishes a framework for understanding the fundamental design principles of an early arcade game, *Pong*. This book is called *Rules of Play* by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman¹².

Rules of Play defines *Pong* as having 6 distinct qualities:

1. It is simple to play
2. Every game is unique. Pong rewards dedicated play: it is easy to learn and difficult to master.
3. It is an elegant representation...a depiction of Table Tennis.
4. It is social. It takes two to play Pong. <its> social circle also extends beyond two players: it makes a great spectator sport.
5. It is fun. Players derive pleasure from competition and winning to the satisfyingly tactile manipulation of the knob.
6. It is cool a cultural artefact¹³.

And theatre shares “the interactive, representational, social, and cultural aspect of Pong [which] simultaneously contribute to the experience of play”¹⁴. Theatre clearly shares the same qualities of play:

1. It is simple to play (for the audience).
2. Every performance is unique. Theatre rewards dedicated focus with mastery.
3. It too is an elegant representation. The protagonist, whether it be Hamlet or Hedda Gabler, creates an immediately satisfying physical and perceptual relationship to life.
4. It is social. It takes two to play and involves interactions with another human being, and is a spectator sport.
5. It is fun. One can interact with a play and its composite parts. At the very least you can enjoy the scenery or the lighting.
6. Finally, a theatre piece necessarily is a cultural artefact.

An early digital game shares values with one of the oldest art forms¹⁵. One way, therefore, to address theatre participation is to consider the audience member as a player.

¹² E. Zimmerman, K. Salen, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, MIT Press, London 2004.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Author's note: While writing this article, I came across an article from *The Guardian* quoting noted entrepreneur and inventor, Elon Musk: “Forty years ago we had Pong- two rectangles and a dot. That’s where we were. Now 40 years later, we have photorealistic, 3D simulations with millions of people playing simultaneously and it’s getting better every

In the digital age, an audience member now can become a player. But what does Digital theatre as a game feel like? Once again, *Rules of Play* is helpful in organising the principles of game design into three primary schemas RULES, PLAY and CULTURE.

- RULES = the organisation of the designed system
- PLAY = the human experience of that system
- CULTURE = the larger contexts engaged with and inhabited by the system¹⁶.

Furthermore, the psychological processes which Rules of Play identify occurring with video games, such as “concentration, visual scanning, auditory discriminations, motor responses and perceptual patterns of learning”¹⁷ clearly also take place within a traditional theatrical experience. Digital technology can augment the theatrical experience by making manifest those processes which hitherto remain discrete.

In conventional theatre; to further the analogy of the audience member as a player within the magic circle; input/information is received from the stage, internal processes occur by which the audience makes decisions or judgements, and outputs occur from the audience’s reaction, either individually or collectively. This experience occurs on a discrete and aesthetic level. However, in one type of Digital Theatre, the audience member becomes a physical player who feels the experience and influences its outcome more concretely. But what does this experience feel like? An article by Jo Caird, “When Theatre goes digital”¹⁸ is indicative.

In the examples Caird cites, content is manipulated by an artist, often constituting a narrative, or multiple potential narratives, for an audience to

year. And soon we’ll have virtual reality, we’ll have augmented reality...If you assume any rate of improvement at all, then the games will become indistinguishable from reality.” O. Solon, “Is our world a simulation?”, *The Guardian*. Published: 11th October, 2016. Accessed 21st October, 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/oct/11/simulated-world-elon-musk-the-matrix>

¹⁶ E. Zimmerman, K. Salen, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, MIT Press, London 2004, p. 6.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 315.

¹⁸ J. Caird, “When theatre goes digital” in www.thespace.org. Published June 2015, Accessed October, 2016. Available at: <https://www.thespace.org/news/when-theatre-goes-digital>

engage with, and on some level ‘feel’. The notion of play is emphasised and digital technology enhances audience participation. Caird interviewed director Alexander Devriendt of Belgian theatre company *Ontroerend Goed*, who created “Fight Night”, “a show about democracy and the act of voting”¹⁹. Audience members are given power, through voting keypads to decide which candidates are worthy of their mandate, in a show which explores democracy, celebrity and manipulation. Software calculates the results, which are displayed on a screen at the end of the show. As Devriendt explains in the article, “You don’t have to pretend you’re a real voter; you’re a voter in the show, with consequences in the show”²⁰. An observer of the U.S. Presidential election of 2016 can attest to the compelling, mediated spectacle of politics as theatre, even if the observer’s only interest is that of entertainment.

Another striking example cited by Caird is “Shelter me”, an immersive circus experience from *Theatre Delicatessen*, a British company which since 2008, has collaborated with property developers to transform empty commercial properties into fully occupied, “pop-up” creative hubs”²¹. This company collaborated with an international circus collective, *Circumference* to create a piece that emphasises how intimacy and trust, rather than alienation, can be enhanced by digital technology. Caird describes the show:

‘Shelter Me’ uses bulk text messaging to audience members’ own mobile phones to direct them around the former offices of the Guardian newspaper, since converted into an atmospheric performance space. Fragments of narrative encourage them to engage with circus performers, other audience members and people outside the theatre experience, coming together at the end of the show for a finale in which they share not just a technological space, but a physical one too²².

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ R. Smith, “About Theatre Delicatessen”, Accessed October, 2016. Available at: <http://theatredelicatessen.co.uk/about/>

²² J. Caird, “When theatre goes digital” in www.thespace.org. Published June 2015, Accessed October, 2016. Available at: <https://www.thespace.org/news/when-theatre-goes-digital>

The intention, cited by the creators is “to create an interactive physical journey where performance, installation and experience meet”²³. Clearly in this example we can observe an experiential refutation, in intention at least, of Huizinga’s notion of technological development’s opposition to spontaneous, organic culture. It is apparent that in practice, technology has great means at its disposal for practitioners to create a new type of magic circle.

A further instance of digital theatre in action explored by Caird’s article is called “World Factory” by Zoë Svendsen and Simon Daw. In this experience the audience engages with international textile trade through a game whereby audience members get to manage a Chinese clothing factory. Workers are hired, fired, paid, have their working conditions improved or diminished, and even bribed, all at the hands of audience members. “Ethical conundrums” are presented to the audience so they can understand the complexity of context and the consequences of their actions²⁴.

As Svendsen, the show’s director and designer, told Caird: “We knew from the beginning that [with] a more traditional form of theatre [it] might be difficult to do justice to the complexity and interconnections of the topic”²⁵. Digital technology calculates “200 million mathematically different outcomes” in real time presenting the audience teams with who “produced the most garments, made the most money and had the lowest staff turnover”²⁶. In this case, digital technology plays an essential role and “pushes the boundaries of audience experience”, according to Svendsen²⁷.

Through these examples one can see what is possible when theatre becomes explicitly an engaging and participative experience. Further research into these types of digital theatre may unlock what the audience experience; how it influences their concept of attending a theatrical experience; if a theatrical experience can be limited to that of attending a

²³ R. Smith, “About Theatre Delicatessen”, Accessed October, 2016. Available at: http://theatredelicatessen.co.uk/js_events/shelter-me/

²⁴ J. Caird, “When theatre goes digital” in www.thespace.org. Published June 2015, Accessed October, 2016. Available at: <https://www.thespace.org/news/when-theatre-goes-digital>

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

theatre building; the limits of such theatrical experiences; and whether indeed those who attend such experiences are more or less likely to attend a theatre. The etymology of the term theatre, “as a place for viewing”²⁸ does not need to impinge future endeavours. If we are open to making the theatre a more kinaesthetic experience, with the aid of technology, the theatrical experience need not only be a place to view a play, but a place where we can *play*.

One may fear the implication that this could mean ‘the death of the author’, if you forgive the misappropriation of Barthes’ phrase. It certainly means a mutation or evolution of what an author can be in this new type of theatre, just as the medium of theatre is challenged and changed by the prevalent technological developments. The author in this case remains a creative force with the same thematic concerns and technical knowhow when it comes to character, dialogue, setting, imagery, etc. However for theatre to be more kinaesthetic and therefore more interactive, we can see how theatrical knowledge can be supplemented with certain design principles, which when mastered helps practitioners conceive of theatre as a place to play. **Why** an author writes: to communicate an artistic message in a social space, remains intact; **how** the author operates in a digital space needs further consideration. That, of course depends on **what** the audience experiences. In this experience, the audience is invited to become an explicit co-creator to fulfil or defy an author’s expectations.

Research into social media platforms provide analogous, if somewhat tangential information that may help to consider the interaction and intersection of humans and technology. Such information may offer insight into the potential that digital technology offers to the arts. For instance, Twitter has been shown to be a successful means for sharing emotions, which appears to lead to greater intimacy. This emotional self-disclosure in

²⁸ D Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Published 2001, Accessed October, 2016. Available at <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=theater>

a mediated environment improves social presence, which in turn has been shown to improve social relationships and concurrent self-expansion²⁹.

This has vital implications for this most social of art forms, theatre. In the examples cited above from Caird we have seen opportunities where the audience have the opportunity not just to experience, but play an active part in the formation of a truly sensorial artistic experience. Central to this experience is a belief that this can lead to greater communality rather than the fearful alienation we think of initially in our interactions with technology.

The Eurobarometer theatre audience participation survey cited earlier in the article implicitly acknowledges Auslander's observation in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* that "live performance and mediatised forms compete for audience in the cultural market place, and that mediatised forms have gained the advantage in that competition"³⁰. The Darwinian challenge that the Eurobarometer survey places declining theatre audiences into can be summed up by the three word maxim uttered by the P.W. Botha on becoming Prime Minister of apartheid South Africa: "Adapt or die"³¹.

The threats and opportunities digital technology present to theatre can also be envisaged in Derrida's deconstruction of Levi-Strauss's logocentrism, said succinctly: "play is the disruption of presence"³². It can be argued that Auslander correctly cautions against the nostalgic guilt that he associates as symptomatic of much of performance theory:

Having lost what we still suspect was the only valid theatre, the theatre of communal ritual, we either rhapsodize about theatres of other times and places

²⁹ J. Kim, and H. Song, "Celebrity's Self-Disclosure on Twitter and Parasocial Relationships: A Mediating Role of Social Presence", March 26, 2015. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2756744> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2756744>

³⁰ P. Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Routledge, Oxon 1999, p. 6.

³¹ J. Gregory, "P. W. Botha, Defender of Apartheid, Is Dead at 90", *The New York Times*, November 1st 2006. Accessed 21st October, 2016. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/01/world/africa/01botha.html?_r=0

³² J. Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play", *Writing and Difference* (1966), Tr. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978, pp. 263–264.

or attempt to ground theatrical activity in versions of presence which bear the stamp of secularism, psychology or political analysis in the place of religion³³.

New experiences are clearly tangible for a classical art form rooted in a digital age. Digital technology offers a potential to put the audience, literally, into a play. Put simply, it is a rejoinder to Stanislavski's thought by saying, 'Love art in yourself, **and** yourself in art'³⁴. The ambitions of such an augmented theatrical experience must be bound by at least one caveat, offered in the last words of an individual who, at the very least, understood the complexity of play. They are the last words of chess player: Bobby Fischer: "Nothing is as healing as the human touch"³⁵.

³³ P. Auslander, "Just Be Your Self": Logocentrism and Difference in Performance Theory", in *Acting Reconsidered: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*, 2nd edition, ed. Philip B Zarilli, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 59.

³⁴ Original quote: "Love art in yourself, not yourself in art." K. Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, Routledge, London 1974.

³⁵ J. Carlin, "The end game of Bobby Fischer", *The Observer*, Published: Sunday 10 February 2008. Accessed October 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2008/feb/10/chess.usa>.